

Our word for today is "friends." We continue reading scripture as written in John 15:12-17. Please turn to it in your bibles and read silently.

J. B. Phillips translates it:

"This is my commandment: that you love one another as I have loved you. There is no greater love than this- that a man should lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I tell you to do. I shall not call you servants any longer, for a servant does not share his master's confidence. No, I call you friends, now, because I have told you everything that I have heard from the Father. It is not that you have chosen me; but it is I who have chosen you. I have appointed you to go and bear fruit that will be lasting; so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he will give it to you."

Who is the most valuable person in the world? A friend. And Jesus clearly agrees. *To be without friends is a serious form of poverty*. After teaching his only commandment- that we are to love one another as he has loved us- Jesus explains it in terms of friendship...how to put friendship into practice, and what happens when we do.

When I was a boy, living in the country east of Tulsa, I was very lonely. One could truly shoot a rifle almost in any direction without fear of hitting anyone. I had, with rare exception, no one to play with. This caused considerable depression. One day my dad brought home Eagermeier's Bible Story Book for me to read, and I read it from cover to cover. I remember coming to the passage we just read. Had I not been so terribly lonely, I probably would have missed it. The word "friend" leaped out at me. How I wanted a friend! As a third or fourth grader, I vividly remember asking another boy at school if he would be my best friend. I said "best" friend, I think, because I didn't want him to think that I had no friends at all. Of course I drove the boy off. At this early age I was already learning that the *most valuable person in the world is a friend*.

Rare indeed, it's often said, is the person who has more friends than can be counted on the fingers of one hand. There are acquaintances in abundance who smile and wish you well; who remember you on your birthday with a card or who might even send flowers should you find yourself in the hospital. But a deep down, honest-to-goodness friend; how many do *you* have? Of course, if you're alone and have no friends, any and all of the acts just mentioned would be gratefully received. All of it is a part of friendship.

In today's scripture Jesus teaches what he means by friendship. He says there is no greater love than that a person lay down his or her life for a friend. I do not think he meant to limit that to '*dying*' for our friend. He meant that we should lay down our '*life*' for our friend. In other words: putting the other person's life before our own. For whom would you gladly turn off your favorite television program? For whom would you miss a meal? Cancel your golf outing? For whom would you bring out of your heart the willingness to forgive again and again?

Jesus, first of all, puts a willingness to spend oneself for the other; not grudgingly nor counting the cost, but eagerly and so ready to help that he will give and give... his very life if need be to aid and save his friend. Jesus teaches repeatedly that it is in doing such that we find true joy in living, and

eternal life itself. It is the highest expression of what it means to be human. Of course, some persons believe that Jesus raises the bar to levels of absurdity. But, if Jesus is correct, the degree to which we back off from commitment to such friendship may be the measure of how we miss the best of life. A non-Christian may achieve such friendship, but a Christian must do so. It is imperative. Still, it is very hard to do, because our nature is to take so much and give so little. But one can serve the friendship Jesus teaches, and countless persons do.

Secondly, this friendship of which Jesus speaks consists in a frank, unhesitating opening of one's heart and whole mind to another, without shyness or secretiveness...to allow another to know him as he really is. This is what Jesus did with the disciples. This is how Jesus separates a friend from a casual acquaintance. He opened his heart to the disciples, and said to them, you are no longer servants, but friends. All that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.

Third, a friend trusts the other with whom he relates, never doubting his loyalty, but looking toward him with confidence as one who will not lie to or lie about his friend. In friendship, trustworthiness is everything. Dishonesty is betrayal that drives a stake into the heart of a friendship.

Well, there you are. Jesus commands us to love one another as he has loved us, and he puts it in terms of friendship. First, that we put other's interest before our own. Second, that we become more open and less secretive about whom we really are. Third, that we hold what a friend tells us in sacred trust.

And then, Jesus lived that love to the very end, dying for his friends, and for you and me.

In my second year of undergraduate studies, I committed to Christian ministry, which opened to me the world of bible study, theology, church history, psychology and more. And what a world it was...and is. Along that seven year course, I became increasingly amazed at the huge world of Christendom born of those few years of Jesus' life. His ministry of three years or so occurred in the dirt and hills of Galilee. The gospels teach that Jesus' life revolved around people- their fear, their needs, their suffering. He encountered opposition and debate. He agonized over human waste and evil. He taught people and prayed. He lived with and mentored a small group of men. Noteworthy is that his recorded life was about relationships...human encounters. As far as church is concerned, we are told of only one specific visit to a synagogue, the one in Nazareth at the beginning of his formal ministry where he simply stood up to read from holy scripture, and was driven out of church and out of town. When he visited the temple in Jerusalem during his last days, it was not a pleasant experience. And finally, he turned toward Jerusalem to die for his friends, to unveil the love of God with depth of meaning beyond our conceiving, a God ever trying to save the world he created, and continues to create every day, every hour, and every minute. For God so loved the world that he gave...he gave his own son...for all who have lived and those yet to come.

I mentioned that my university studies increasingly amazed me. How? By the complexity of evolving theology, of creeds, elaborate churches and cathedrals...by the formality and form of worship and liturgy...by the raiment worn by clergy, and the hierarchical power and politics. I pay them no disrespect. I love theology, philosophy and church history. There is so much to learn, and one can never learn but a small part of it. I marvel at magnificent cathedrals and beautiful churches.

But as it all passed before my eyes, I found myself drawn back to the early days of my life to those moving 18 words in John 15:13: “There is no greater love than this- that a man should lay down his life for his friends.” These words remain clear, simple and unsurpassed by the industry of religion.

The older I grow, the more I gravitate toward simplicity. I love this sanctuary, because it presents such a wonderful balance between beauty and simplicity. I love our times of worship, because our formality is balanced by laughter and imperfection...especially my preaching. Humility and modesty serve us well. There is little putting on of airs. I love our fellowship. We are a relational church. We try to be a church of friends. We dwell not as much on church creeds and formalities, but on befriending one another in Christ’s spirit...taking time to listen to one another, attend our wounds, and do what Christ’s love has the power to do for us. Our church in some ways is so low key and simple in its life, that some of us drift to competing things, not realizing how profound and holy this place is.

I receive letters often from folks who’ve moved away, saying how much they miss our church, how much it continues to mean to them, and how they have not succeeded in finding another like it.

Just Friday, Jeff Langner dropped me a note. I’m sure he won’t mind my quoting. He says: “What sparked this particular email was the fact that over dinner last night, Susan and I got to talking about all of our amazing CCC friends and wondering how folks at the church were doing. We realize quite often how blessed we were to have such an amazing church family, and to have been touched by so many kind, generous, and sincere individuals in that congregation. We do miss you all so dearly and eagerly await the chance to visit you all sometime in the spring- preferably when the 20 inches of snow melt!”

I’ve heard from several persons this week with interest in today’s sermon. Judy Mankus gave me permission to share this... Her family seldom went to church. When she was 7 or 8 years old, at a church service, she remembers hearing a phrase that struck her deeply. She wrote it down in big colorful, block letters on a doodle page. She had to break up the letters because she ran out of room, but kept the paper a very long time. Kids, seeing the letters, teased her because they didn’t know what they meant. She remembers those letters today, and how she wrote them. (Look on the back page of the bulletin. They’re printed near the bottom on the left side. In Judy language it reads: “love eac hother.”) But the meaning is clear. And what a witness her life is to these words.

I submit to you, that what Judy heard and copied as a little girl, goes to the heart of what Jesus taught those few years in Galilee.

I further submit to you, that at the end of our days when we approach heaven’s gate, the first words we will most likely hear are... “Do you remember John 15:17?”